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RATIONALITY VERSUS RELATIVISM: A REVIEW OF "READING THE PAST" BY IAN HODDER

James A. Bell

Ian Hodder's latest book[1] evaluates current approaches to interpretation in archaeology, develops his "contextual" approach, and argues for a number of socio-political views to be used in framing contextual interpretations. His primary goal throughout is to find tools for recapturing meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples. Hence his evaluations highlight the contributions and limitations of current approaches to coax out meaning. Likewise, his development of the contextual approach focuses on its effectiveness in reconstructing meaning. Finally, his support of certain socio-political views is aimed at utilising them to build contextual interpretations of meaning.

The two sides of any 'approach' -- method and theory -- are both given attention by Hodder. Appropriately he focuses on method -- on guidelines for formulating and assessing hypotheses -- in developing his contextual approach. Also commendably, he attempts to shape his methodological guidelines in light of the theoretical content (meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples) that he wishes to capture. Even his evaluations of current approaches concentrate on the methodological pole, although his lack of clear distinction between it and the theoretical pole does contribute to some confusions. For the most part, however, Hodder's analyses of method, and recommendations concerning method, are guided by his understanding of the theoretical goals for which it should be designed.

It is to Dr. Hodder's credit that he analyses method within the context of his goal, treating method as a tool for attaining ends rather than as an end in itself. Methodological discussions in the Philosophy of Science, and in the methodological literature of archaeology, so often treat method as an end rather than as a means. The implication -- that method should be imposed *a priori* to justify theory -- has, to put it charitably, created confusion. In the first and third parts of the book, however, Hodder traps himself in another snare: he uses a *relativistic* conclusion -- that there are no rational guidelines for assessing theories -- that follows from the straw-man premise that positivistic method has failed. Taken literally, this conclusion is a methodological *faux pas*: it 'justifies' asserting hypotheses without serious rational assessment. That argument and its consequences for Dr. Hodder's book are the foci of the major criticism in this review and will be discussed in the second section. The first part of the review will offer a synopsis accompanied by incidental comment.

(Archaeological Review from Cambridge 6:1 [1987])

Synopsis and Comment

Reading the Past can be divided into three parts: (1) evaluation of the contributions and limitations of current approaches for capturing meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples, (2) an outline, with examples and commentary, of Hodder's "contextual" approach for reconstructing meaning, and (3) presentation of a series of political and social outlooks which Hodder recommends be closely considered when reconstructing meaning for prehistoric peoples. The three parts of the book will be discussed in order below.

Marxist, Structuralist and Processual Approaches

Marxist, structuralist, and processual approaches occupy most of the author's critical attention. All are examples of what can be called holistic approaches (reviewer's terminology) -- those which assume that what humans think, will, desire or believe are not significant factors in the development or structure of human groups. Holistic approaches would be clearly inadequate for the theoretical goal Dr. Hodder has set himself in this book, which assumes "that material culture is meaningfully constituted" (p. 1) and "that the individual needed to be a part of theories of material culture and social change" (p. 1). It is appropriate that he analyses each of the approaches to bring out the contributions and limitations for theories about the experience of prehistoric peoples.

Hodder acknowledges that Marxist approaches, which place ideational elements in dialectical relation with material factors, provide an impetus towards uncovering meaning. On the other hand, Marxist approaches can run roughshod over ideational elements that are not adequately interpretable from a materialist source, and are prone to indiscriminate projection of a functional interpretation of social structure onto the experience of actual humans.

Hodder underscores the fact that structuralism -- the view that our experience is generated from a priori categories of the mind, and hence are universal for humans -- also relegates unique elements of meaning to the background. Even though the focus is on the mind, human experience is interpreted as a product of its structures rather than as a creative process.

Incidentally, the 'high structuralism' criticised by Hodder -- not to be confused with the contextual structuralism utilised by him -- is often considered the epitome of idealism, and Marxist approaches as the epitome of materialism. Hodder's analyses of Marxism and high structuralism yield an important insight: what they have in common -- the holistic assumption that humans are pawns of structures outside themselves, and the corollary that the experience of humans is principally an epiphenomenon of elements transcendent to their own agency -- can be interpreted as more important than the way they differ.

This is a different perspective from which to view both traditions, usually considered as opposites.

Hodder's critique of the Marxist and structuralist approaches is not only insightful, but also remains focussed on the point of his analysis: to assess the contributions and limitations of capturing meaning. It is understandable that he would emphasise weaknesses, but he also points out strengths and gives thorough acknowledgement to many of the primary contributors. A balanced presentation, based upon careful consideration of the issues, is the result.

It is not possible to be as complimentary of Hodder's analysis of processual approaches. The most far-reaching errors are his identification of processual approaches with positivist method, and the equation of it with the New Archaeology. These errors provide him with the (strawman) premise for his relativist conclusion. Unravelling the confusions underlying Hodder's mistaken conflation of positivistic method and processual approaches -- and hence those with the New Archaeology -- will be a task for the second section of this review. Below follows a synopsis of his critique of processual archaeology, with brief mention of some insights and lacunae.

Processual theories -- theories which attempt to explain change from one state-of-affairs to another -- are also holistic. Like the Marxist and structuralist approaches, they largely sidestep attribution of agency on the part of humans, and avoid speculation about the inner lives or thoughts of peoples, prehistoric or otherwise. Hodder correctly notes an advantage for theory building in prehistoric archaeology: written records, one of the most important sources for understanding inner experience, are scant to nonexistent.

Hodder emphasises that human agency -- thoughts, beliefs, will, and other significant elements of change -- cannot be adequately incorporated into processual approaches. One cannot entirely agree with him on that point. Most processual approaches have avoided human agency, but some -- notably the new type of cognitive approach -- do explicitly incorporate cognition under the assumption that ideas are important elements in change.

Hodder does miss one distinct, indeed crucial, advantage of most processual approaches. He mentions that the New Archaeology (processual archaeology, in his view) incorporated quantitative and statistical techniques (p. 147), but he does not seem to recognise that their principal function is to sharpen the testing of theories. In many processual approaches the artefactual record can be used for theoretical tests, and those tests can be made even more severe by use of quantitative and other formal means for deducing the testable implications more precisely. Many processual theories are thus vulnerable to error -- a very beneficial quality -- and have been altered or replaced by better processual theories. As a result, they have served as stepping-stones for greater understanding and new insight, much of it

unanticipated in the light of prior processual theories. In brief, processual theories have largely been amenable to refutationist method.

More boldly, I will assert that the most important key for the theoretical understanding and empirical insight produced by processual approaches is due to the refutationist method by which it can be guided. Instead of recognising the refutationist method underlying much of processual archaeology, Dr. Hodder instead equates processual archaeology with positivistic method, arguably the least valuable for theoretical work.

Incidentally, the more stringent refutationist underpinnings of much processual archaeology also distinguish it from structuralist and Marxist approaches. As perspectives with elements of validity, structuralist and Marxist approaches are certainly valuable. As stepping-stones in a research program that can yield unanticipated understanding and new insight, they are of much less value. That is why theories of the latter too often seem to yield little unanticipated understanding once having been used to interpret a culture. By way of contrast, consider the following example.

By interpreting the classical diffusionist theory for the origin of European culture as refuted by carbon dating techniques, the way was paved for the use of systemic theories. Systemic explanations are radically different from diffusionist explanations: the latter are unanticipated -- unpredictable -- from the former. High structuralist and Marxist approaches, on the other hand, assume that certain broad categories of interpretation are always correct; that is why the broad categories can unintentionally become repetitive and, unlike the processual approaches which use refutationist method, quite predictable. Even though the interpretive differences within the broad categories can offer new perspectives, the methodological means for superseding those broad categories is not present. In any case, having missed the refutationist underpinnings of much processual archaeology, Dr. Hodder thus misses that important methodological difference between it and the other two theoretical approaches that occupy his attention in the first part of the book.

The Contextual Approach

The second part of the book is, in my view, the highlight. In it Dr. Hodder bears directly down on the goal of his book: the search "for an adequate answer to the problem of how we infer past cultural meanings" (p. 118). Here, Hodder outlines the contextual approach to capturing human meaning in archaeology, and illustrates it with examples. His discussion emphasises, and the examples illustrate, the use of artefactual data for generating and correcting hypotheses. As his hypotheses about meaning became discordant with the data, he courageously interprets them as mistaken, and modifies or even replaces them with new hypotheses. Not content with a few alterations, he continues to search for other potential mistakes, either in clashes with other

data or as inconsistencies with other conjectures within his theoretical constructs. In short, his contextual approach is characterised by much of the substance and certainly the spirit of refutationist method, in this case to coax out meaning in human experience.

Refutationist method when applied to individualistic assumptions -- that the structure of, and changes in, groups should be reduced to the decisions and actions of individuals -- is called methodological individualism, or simply individualistic method. Methodological individualism, with its refutationist foundation, is clearly evident in the contextual approach espoused by Dr. Hodder in the second part of the book.

The inspiration Hodder finds in the approach of Max Weber, an example of whose work he outlines as a preliminary model for his own contextual approach, is rtainly appropriate (pp. 81-86). Weber is often considered the direct precursor if not the father of methodological individualism. Much more important than the historical precedent, however, and to Hodder's credit, is his willingness to recognise the difficulties in constructing plausible theories about human experience. Even the 'final' constructs in his examples leave one with the sense that they could be modified in more ways, with further understanding and insight yet possible. That is a compliment, not a criticism, from a refutationist perspective.

A difficulty with Hodder's contextual approach is inherent in his goal, not in the method used to strive towards it. His primary example -- explaining the meaning of the decoration on the calabashes of the Ilchamus tribe in Baringo district, Kenya -- is ethnographic, affording the opportunity for direct communication with the Ilchamus. Such communication is not possible for conjectures about the experience of prehistoric peoples, of course, where the artefactual record does not speak. His appropriate insistence that good archaeological theory must always answer to the material record is much more difficult to fulfil when trying to reconstruct meaning for peoples with whom there is no verbal link. Nevertheless, use of individualistic method for the goal of understanding the inner life of prehistoric people does seem to be the only reliable route, and I would hope he and others would use it as best possible.

My major criticism of the second part of the book is that there is not enough of it. Expanded in length and amplified in content, plausibly at the expense of the less important first and third parts of the book, it could function better as a pedagogical manual. More and different types of examples, along with discussions tracing the implications of Hodder's approach further, would have been helpful. Another criticism is that some elements of the third part of the book creep into the second. Let me now turn to that third part.

Social-Political Views

In the third part of the book Hodder presents a number of political and social themes, such as the suppression of women, that he recommends be given close consideration when using the contextual approach to capturing meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples. Feminist perspectives are suggested along with two other 'alternative' perspectives: indigenous archaeologies and working-class archaeologies. These hallmarks of the 1960s provide an ideational handle by which, Hodder suggests, the experience of prehistoric peoples can be uncovered. I will concentrate on Hodder's rationale for the feminist approach which, it must be clearly understood, should not be assumed to be the same as for all feminist approaches in archaeology.

Surely it is conceivable, and actually seems likely, that some prehistoric women felt what is now popularly called suppression. What it 'meant' to them, however, would be dependent on what causal interpretations they might have made: men, cosmic forces, some other factor, or no factor at all. Establishing the most plausible interpretation would seem far beyond what could ever be known with confidence from the artefactual record. Even if a category such as 'suppression of women' would be thought definitive in an archaeological context, it could just as well be interpreted as submission, even willing submission, of women and men, to an arrangement that could fulfil the desire of having and raising children. Even in a setting in which one could communicate with individual women, such as in the Western cultures where the feminist movement is strong, a generality like 'women are suppressed', when applied to what individual women experience, is not supportable. Of course some feel they are, and of course others feel they are not.

If there is such difficulty about establishing generalised claims about the experience of women today, it would seem all the more reason to be reluctant to assert them as generalised elements in the lives of prehistoric peoples. Such perspectives concerning meaning can be asserted about the prehistoric past, but so can almost anything else -- including denial of those assertions. Gone would be the benefits of individualistic method and its refutationist underpinnings Hodder employs in his contextual approach of the second part of the book.

Unfortunately, suggestions for interpretation of meaning offered by Dr. Hodder in the third part of the book are not amenable to the use of refutationist method, with the corrective benefits and unanticipated understanding and insight that are its fruit. That is why they become claims -- perhaps true in some way, perhaps not -- rather than conjectures that could be assessed effectively.

The lack of plausible method in the third part concerning the interpretation of the experience of prehistoric peoples is so obvious as to be astonishing, especially in light of the fact that the author has incorporated individualistic method for his contextual approach in the

second part. The inconsistency is so important that a careful explanation is warranted.

Rationality or Relativism?

In the third part of the book, Dr. Hodder abandons individualistic method as a tool for making rational decisions about interpretations of meaning, adopting in its place the relativist position that any interpretation is as plausible as any other. The bones of the argument underlying that conclusion have already been revealed, but let it be repeated here: the conclusion that there are no reliable rational guidelines for assessing theories can be drawn from the strawman premise that positivistic method has failed. In this section I will first discuss how confusions in the first part of the book yield the mistaken premise of the argument, and then show how the relativistic conclusion is drawn, and used, in the third part of the book. This section will end with comments on how the relativistic conclusion compromises his contextual approach.

Before beginning, it should be clearly stated that the argument for relativism is not articulated explicitly in the book, although hints are given in numerous places. Rather, the argument is a reconstruction of ideas in the first and third parts. In the course of writing the book, I suspect something like the following scenario may have taken place:

Dr. Hodder was unlikely to have been aware of the confusions in the first part of the book. Given those confusions, however, the mistaken premise certainly became plausible. Having accepted it, the relativistic conclusion does follow validly, and it was further supported, in his view, by his interpretation of Critical Theory, as well as by some ideas of Foucault. Given his interest in uncovering meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples, but the difficulties of finding categories by which to interpret it, Hodder turned to the methodological perspective of Critical Theory and the social perspective of Foucault to fill the gap.

The Strawman Premise: Confusions in the First Part

Processual approaches and positivistic method are inseparable in Hodder's account. His conflation of the two is by no means unique; melding processual approaches together with positivistic method is a widespread mistake of both processual archaeologists and their critics. Arguments as to why they should be separated will be made shortly. Beforehand I will outline Hodder's account.

Dr. Hodder conflates positivism with processual approaches, referring to "processual, positivist approaches" (ix), for example, and references to them seem interchangeable throughout the book. Processual archaeology is also conflated with the New Archaeology, as when he refers to "the whole of the New Archaeology or processual archaeology" (p. 26). The New Archaeology is also identified with positivism, such

as in Hodder's references to "positivist New Archaeology" (p. 39), or "positivistic New Archaeology" (p. 152). In brief, all three -- positivism, processual archaeology, and the New Archaeology -- are identified with each other.

Arguments for a thorough clarification of the above confusions are beyond the scope of this review. The following points, however, may be made.

First, positivism is arguably the least valuable of all views of science for theoretical work, in archaeology or most any other discipline. The goal of positivist method is to verify explanations (often universal claims) inductively, and to exclude from consideration 'metaphysical' -- nonverifiable -- elements, such as 'mind' and 'causality'. The goal of establishing truth, or probable truth, is suspect. It seems more plausible to search for conjectures in which errors can be found, so that new ideas -- not established ideas -- will be the result. Furthermore, truth, or probable truth, cannot be established anyway, at least for hypotheses of theoretical interest. Isolating the constituent events, and stipulating the prior probabilities of them -- both of which must be done to calculate the probability of explanations -- is impossible. Even if the probabilities could be calculated, acceptance of a range of probability for confidence in an explanation encourages the acceptance of improbable, but possible, anomalies. This discourages the interpretation of anomalies as refutations and hence discouraging the possibility of exploiting them for unanticipated understanding and novel insight.

Second, successful processual archaeology is much closer to refutationism rather than positivism in methodological terms. That it has refutationist underpinnings was argued in the first section of the paper.

Third, processual archaeology refers to a <u>type</u> of archaeological explanation -- of 'processes', or how a given state-of-affairs is transformed into another state-of-affairs -- whereas positivism and other methodological views offer guidelines for the formulation and assessment of explanations, whether the explanations are processual or not. Separating method from theory is as important as distinguishing between a house and the tools used to build it. The tools can be used for many other purposes, such as building a wooden bridge, for example, or a barge. Refutationist method can be used in processual approaches, for example, as well as in Hodder's own contextual approach.

Fourth, the meaning of the New Archaeology utilised by the author is, for the most part, the <u>external</u> meaning: that of imposing precast standards of science to evaluate archaeological theories, usually positivistic and usually from some ('external') source such as a Philosopher(s) of Science. The <u>internal</u> New Archaeology, in which the methodological assumptions of archaeologists are themselves made explicit, criticised, and sometimes altered so that explanatory

processes can be better understood and used, is not emphasised by the author even though it has in my view been by far the most fruitful type of New Archaeology. <u>Analytical Archaeology</u> by David Clarke is a good example, and is referred to admiringly in another context later in the book (p. 174), but is not taken as paradigmatic of the New Archaeology.

Incidentally, some of the work of Lew Binford is representative of the external New Archaeology, as are the recommendations offered by Watson, Leblanc, and Redman in <u>Explanation in Archaeology: an Explicitly Scientific Approach</u>. Since the above adopt versions of positivistic method, and are considered processual, it is not surprising that Hodder would identify positivism, processual archaeology, and the New Archaeology. To do such is to build on the confusions in other work, however, rather than on strengths.

Via confusions in the first part of his book, then, Hodder has established the elements for a strawman premise, and the relativistic conclusion follows immediately. More specifically, by having implicitly confined rationality to the highly questionable positivistic standard with its unworkable inductive method, and then identifying processual archaeology and the New Archaeology with positivistic standards, the conclusion that there are no reliable standards of rationality is valid. It is in the third part of the book that the relativistic conclusion, and its lack of viable method, becomes of paramount importance.

<u>Relativist Justification: The Third Part</u>

The confusions in the first part of the book, along with the relativistic argument that can be constructed with them, might seem unimportant in the overall flow of <u>Reading the Past</u>. Hodder's goal of developing an approach to capture meaning is clearly not compatible with holistic aproaches, including processual ones, which are explicitly designed to avoid such individualistic features. Even those ideational elements which the author is careful to acknowledge within processual archaeology are correctly assessed by him as elements which impact upon humans, rather than those about which humans have a choice. Thus it can be concluded that the confusions concerning positivism, processual archaeology, and the New Archaeology, along with the relativistic argument that can be structured with them, may be worthy of note but should not be significant in the grand design of <u>Reading the Past</u>.

The conclusion above would be acceptable if there were no third part of the book. Once the crucial role played by the relativistic conclusion for the author's recommendations in the third part of the book is grasped, however, and its implications for the contextual approach are revealed, those confusions, and the relativistic conclusion supported by them, become crucial. Let me explain.

Given Dr. Hodder's (misplaced) suspicion of rational standards and method -- at least outside the second part of the book -- it is not surprising that he would turn to an irrational view of theory: that

sociological factors, and especially 'power', are the key to understanding the role of theory, especially in archaeology and other disciplines with social and political overtones. The Frankfurt school, with the sociological perspective of its Critical Theory, and Foucault's interpretations of power in human institutions, provide the inspiration.

The thesis of Critical Theory and Foucault particularly relevant to Hodder's book is what can be called the power view of science: the view that so-called scientific standards are themselves best understood as tools of power. More specifically, scientific standards and the method implied by them -- writ large for areas beyond science, that means rational standards and the method implied by them -- not only lack solid foundation, but function perniciously, although not necessarily intentionally, as a smoke screen for authoritarian power games in which (faulty) claims to scientific status or rational plausibility are used to impose one's favourite views. These ideas lead Hodder to state that "method too is ideological" (p. 169). Before criticising the power view, let me point out what seems valuable in it.

The power view of scientific method has certainly rendered important contributions to understanding science in general, archaeology in particular. Almost everyone is aware of despicable cases in archaeology where theories about the past have been used, even deliberately, to propagandise. More generally, there clearly is danger of unintentionally misusing labels like 'scientific' and 'rational' in ways that have little promise of promoting greater understanding, but which nevertheless convey an aura of correctness. In short, there always are sociological factors involved in science, archaeology, or any other enterprise, and they certainly can and are sometimes abused, both intentionally and unintentionally. Critical theorists have opened many eyes to such abuses.

Do notice, nevertheless, that one need not be a relativist to recognise or be repelled by the abuses above. They can be interpreted as miscarriages of science and rationality, rather than the 'essence' of science and rationality, as a relativist is bound to conclude. That is one criticism of the power view.

A much greater danger of the power view, however, is that one adhering to it can justify their own imposition of theory without being bothered with standards of science. In a relativist's eyes there are no rational ways of choosing between theories anyway. A relativist can thus feel justified in playing, even intentionally, the same power game that the power view has been so helpful in exposing. That is why, I suggest, Hodder can so easily overlook the methodological difficulties (discussed in the first section of this paper) of recommending that feminist and other social and political views as categories through which to reconstruct the experience of prehistoric peoples. Anyone else with any other social and political views could do the same, and with the same relativistic justification. I would not expect archaeological theory to prove very enlightening for very long under such conditions.

To avoid misinterpretation, it must be stated clearly that interpretations such as feminist ones in anthropology and archaeology have been enlightening, and much more is likely to be revealed in the future through them. But when those views are taken as more than considered interpretations to be evaluated in light of the material record and weighed against competing interpretations, critical assessment of them can easily slip away, taking with it the genuine fruit they can bear.

Finally, Hodder states that "Contextual archaeology undoubtedly has links with the 'anti-system' movements of the sixties" (p. 163). If the relativistic underpinnings of the third part of Reading the Past are allowed to slip into Hodder's contextual approach, though -- and he seems to intend that -- his own methodological recommendations would be compromised. For example, the high structuralism which he so appropriately criticised will likely find a way into the contextual structuralism which he recommends. The reason is that a relativist could dogmatically assert a social-political view to reconstruct meaning, the consequence of which is not greatly different from assuming structures a priori. Likewise, the Marxist tendency to confuse an interpretation of how institutions function with the experience of people, also appropriately criticised by Hodder, is likely to continue rather than be defused. Using functional interpretations of institutions, like the suppression of women, in the reconstruction of the experience of prehistoric women would amount to making a mistake for which he criticises Marxist approaches. To avoid these ironic consequences -- ironic because Hodder takes such care to criticise current approaches which entail them -- it would be sufficient for him to abandon the relativist position. If it had been given up, the book would have had two parts rather than three. In my opinion, that would have been preferable.

Conclusion

Dr. Hodder's passionate desire to build a route to meaning in the lives of prehistoric peoples poses a challenge to archaeologists. That it comes from a well known figure, and one who himself has made sizeable contributions to processual approaches, makes it all the more significant.

Dr. Hodder states that "It will be necessary, then, in the quest for an adequate archaeology of mind, to ditch decisively that natural science, covering law approach" (p. 30). Of course that positivistic view should be trashed: it is not good method for theoretical work even in the physical sciences. A refutationist view of science, however, and the method implied by it, do provide useful guidelines for theory building and assessment. Where Dr. Hodder employs refutationist guidelines with individualistic assumptions in the second part of this book, the results are promising. When those guidelines are overlooked or disregarded on relativistic grounds, the result is a lack of rational standards and the methodological muddle that follows. Encouraging

multiple interpretations of the past is certainly valuable, but giving up on methodological guidelines by which to exploit them for understanding and insight is harmful. It would be unfortunate indeed if such muddle were allowed to compromise the promise of his contextual approach which, I suspect, will be realised in direct relation to use of individualistic method.

In closing, I will add that Reading the Past is a difficult book to interpret. On numerous issues, one finds Dr. Hodder's viewpoints accompanied by qualifiers that amount to counterviews. It is not easy to know where he stands. Even his position on relativism, perhaps the most crucial in the entire book, is not clear:

> An open relativism appears at first to be the only solution, whereby 'anything goes.' Certainly there are some attractive aspects of this solution, if it allows greater debate between different viewpoints and a fuller involvement of archaeology in contemporary social and political issues. Yet most archaeologists feel that this solution is too extreme. Most feel that some interpretations of the past are not as good as others, that not everything can be said with equal integrity. (p. 169)

I have shot the best of my arsenal at Dr. Hodder, and deliberately forged the ammunition to expose its sharpest edges. I strongly recommend reading on, where Dr. Hodder will fire in return.

Notes

1. Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology. Ian Hodder, Cambridge University Press, 1986, ISBN 0-521-33960-X, £6.95 (Paper); ISBN 0-521-32743-I, £20.50 (Hard).

READING BELL READING 'READING THE PAST'

Ian Hodder

I would like to start by considering some of the hard objective evidence that Jim Bell uses against me. At the end of his review article he quotes from p.169 of Reading the Past. Bell uses this evidence to show that my position on relativism is not clear and that on numerous issues I provide confusing sets of qualifiers and counterviews. Also, in the context of Bell's overall review, the quote, referring as it does to relativism, appears to substantiate his assertion that my position on relativism is perhaps the most crucial in the entire book.

My book is a real thing (in the same way that archaeological data are real). And yet in reading Bell's reading of my book I realise that he often did not see what I wrote or what I thought I wrote. The book is real but different readers give it different realities. For example, I think that it is unambiguously clear in the context of adjacent paragraphs in the book that the phrase in the first part of the quote, "an open relativism appears at first to be the only solution", is not my position. Indeed, in the context of the book as a whole, relativism is one '-ism' that I do not directly discuss at all! If the 'evidence' of the index is anything to go by, p.169 is the only place in the book where the word relativism is used. Far from being central to my account, relativism is entirely peripheral. On the other hand, I think it is unambiguously clear in the context of the book that I agree with the last sentence in the quote Bell provides: "Most feel that some interpretations of the past are not as good as others, that not everything can be said with equal integrity". Indeed, the sentence which follows this on p.169 of Reading the Past suggests that "the contemporary social basis of our reconstructions of the past does not necessitate a lack of validity for those reconstructions". At the top of the following page, I say that "in my view it is possible critically to evaluate past and present contexts in relation to each other, so as to achieve a better understanding of both".

These statements certainly do not read like relativism as defined by Bell. For him, relativism is the view that any interpretation is as plausible as any other, that there are no rational guidelines for assessing theories. It is seen as an irrational view of theory. He accepts that the second (and central) part of my book is not relativist, but goes on to claim that I am a relativist despite the above quotes, despite the fact that I only use the word once and despite the fact that when I do use the word it is clearly disapproved of. Why does Bell claim that I am relativist in the face of all the evidence? I think the answer is that when we read a book (or archaeological evidence) it is not a passive process of absorbing information. Rather, we read in a creative way, putting meaning on and into the data.

(Archaeological Review from Cambridge 6:1 [1987])